

# Are women "in the image of God"?

## The rabbis' multivalent use of a story

Mt.21.28-31: Son, go and work....I don't want to...but he went. Son, go and work....I will...but he didn't go.

After my Bible presentation at the Craigville Colloquy, two audience-responses had to do with "the image of God" (Gn.1.27) vis-a-vis women. Noting that the Jews put less weight on the expression than do present-day Christians, I supported the point by quoting an early Christian (Paul) who could even limit the creational "image of God" to the male sex (1Cor.11.7). This Thinksheet is a clarification & expansion of that assertion.

1 The Contemporary English Version translates the Hebraism in both passages as "like" God. Gn.1.27: "God created humans to be like himself." 1Cor.11.7: "Men were created to be like God and to bring honor to God. This means that a man should not wear anything on his head. Women were created to bring honor to men." (Quasi-humorous aside: I used this verse to defend myself against wearing the freshman beanie in college, & won--which ended that humiliating practice in that college in perpetuity.) NOTE: CEV has set the two passages in contradiction--the 1st assigned the "image" to both sexes, the 2nd limited it to one sex. No contradiction in the Hebrew, which does not clearly state that the "image" is in both sexes (CEV, "humans") but rather says "the man": God created the man (the Adam, man) in his image." If the CEV translation were correct, Paul could not have used this creation story to limit the "image" to males.

2 The rabbis, including Rabbi Jesus, were realistic about the relationship of talk to life. The Matthean parable quoted above is ironic up to, but not stepping over the line into, cynicism. Jesus accused "the Pharisees" (of whom he was one with one foot, the other foot being Essene) of big talk & small walk (like the parable's 2nd son). Paul might be accused of big walk (in that he was, for his times, radically gender-egalitarian) & (in disallowing, in 1Cor.11.7, the "image" to women) small talk (as in the case of the parable's 1st son).

3 Let's have no doubt: Paul's woman-trouble (of which he had, so far as we know, no personal dimension) was self-caused: flatly, he taught that all Christians are, "in Christ" (though not in the Hellenistic culture in which they all lived), equal (Gal.2.28 CEV: "Faith in Christ is what makes each of you equal with each other,...a man or a woman."). His earliest extant writing is to a church that had in it few Jews (for they were turned off by his high christology: "Jesus is Lord" & parallel high-attributes most of the Jews in Thessalonica considered blasphemous). The non-Jews, however, flocked to his message. Highly significant is the fact that that Gentile church had in it "many important women" (Acts 17.4) who, as high-positioned in Thessalonian society, had extensive freedoms before Paul arrived with a message that added to their already high freedom! The idea that Paul was a misanthropist, or even only a traditional Jewish male concerned to keep women "in their place," is an unsustainable canard against him. He could almost be accused of the opposite: his letters mention so many women church-leaders by name, & his woman-trouble comes almost entirely from the hubris of newly (gospel-)liberated women. (The girls, unloosed, get just as carried away into excess as do unloosed boys.)

4 To speak categorically, Paul's theological ethics were gender-egalitarian, but his "situation"-prudential ethics were realistic (in the interest of optimal social-control vis-a-vis the differential/sanctional practices & expectations in Hellenistic society. He was not so foolish as to let his churches, by their excesses, get laughed out of a hearing. Minor social deferences to the male were, he judged, societally necessary, but, he judged, did not compromise fe/male equality "in Christ."

5 In contemporary liberal Protestantism, unfortunately "image of God" has come to be the central sanction for, & almost equivalent of, "human dignity." Ergo, if women are without the "image," they are deprived of human dignity! This is an Enlightenment corruption of a biblical metaphor. Personally, I read the Hebrew of Gn.1.27 as inclusive of women within the "image"; but the fact that the Hebrew need not so be read, needs to be given weight. Rabbis could make multivalent use of a story, & Paul doubtless sometimes read Gn.1.27 otherwise than in 1Cor.11.7.